HI 300 A1: American Popular Culture  
Fall 2016  
EPC 205, M/W/F 9:00-10:00 am

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**Course Description:** This course investigates the rise and evolution of popular culture in America from the mid-nineteenth century through the end of the twentieth century. We will explore the social and cultural contexts in which influential forms of popular culture emerged—with particular attention to popular music, film, and television—and analyze their impact on issues of race, gender, and class. In addition, we will consider audience and critical reactions to popular culture and appraise how popular cultural forms have impacted the political landscape. Finally, we will evaluate the ways in which popular culture has been used to both advance and contest the dominant culture in U.S society and assess the degree to which popular culture has served as a democratizing agent in America.

**Course Organization/Requirements:** This course requires a good deal of reading, writing, and listening along with your active participation in class discussions. For each class, you should arrive prepared to discuss the assigned readings, songs, and films. Class meetings will mix lectures with discussions of assigned readings, songs, and films and occasionally introduce additional primary and secondary sources. I encourage you to email me interesting news items related to the course topic so that I can share them with the class.

Specific course requirements are as follows:

- 4 Reading Responses  
- Take Home Midterm Exam  
- Analytic Paper  
- Final Exam  
- Attendance and active participation in class discussions

Further details about each of these requirements will be provided in class. Please note that each student is required to meet with the Teaching Fellow to discuss his or her selected topic for the analytic paper.

**Required Books:** The following books are available at the Barnes and Noble in Kenmore Square:

Douglas, Susan J. *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*. Three Rivers


Publishing Group, 2012.

All other readings will be available on the course Blackboard site (see below). You will always
be expected to bring a copy of the reading materials to class on the day on which they are due.

You will also need to view the following films: *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *It Happened
One Night* (1934). *The Birth of a Nation* can be viewed through Boston University’s Kanopy
video streaming service at [https://bu.kanopystreaming.com/](https://bu.kanopystreaming.com/) and *It Happened One Night* can be
rented from iTunes or amazon.com.

**Grade Breakdown:** Your final grade will be calculated as follows:

- Reading Responses: 10%
- Take Home Midterm Exam: 25%
- Analytic Paper: 25%
- Final Exam: 25%
- Class participation: 15%

**Teaching Fellow:** In this course, you will be assigned a Teaching Fellow who will take an
interest in your course performance, hold office hours, grade your work, and be available to
discuss readings and assignments. The Teaching Fellow will also hold discussion/review
sessions to provide additional time for discussing assignments and to support students in
preparing for exams. While participation in these sessions is not required, students are strongly
encouraged to attend them. Each discussion/review session will be offered at two different times
so that all interested students are able to participate.

**Blackboard:** Our class has a Blackboard site that contains the syllabus, assignments, readings,
songs, and other course-related materials. You can log in to our Blackboard page at:
[learn.bu.edu](http://learn.bu.edu)

You will have a personal Blackboard folder where you will submit completed assignments.

**Email Policy:** I welcome your email communications. Please allow up to 48 hours for a
response. I do not discuss grades over email, so if you wish to discuss the grade you received on
a particular assignment, please schedule a time to meet with me.

**Laptop Policy:** You may use a laptop for select classroom activities, and I will indicate when
students are allowed to do so. Otherwise, students may not use laptops during class.

**Cell Phone Policy:** Cell phones are not allowed during class. If you use your cell phone during
class, it will lower your class participation grade.
Late Assignments: Graded assignments will be penalized by one-third of a letter grade for each class day they are late. If you are habitually late with your assignments, you will be unable to participate fully in the class, which will be reflected in your class participation grade.

Attendance Policy: Your regular attendance and participation are essential both to your own learning and to your classmates’ learning. Missing more than three classes will lower your final grade. Missing more than two weeks of class may lead to a failing grade in the course. Note that these absences need not be consecutive. If you have a special obligation that will require you to miss several classes (e.g., varsity athletics, religious observances), please talk with me at the beginning of the semester.

Formatting for Papers: All assignments must be word-processed and adhere to either the Chicago or MLA style guidelines. Assignments should be submitted as Microsoft Word files and formatted in the following way: double spaced, 12pt Times New Roman font, 1-inch margins.

In addition to submitting hard copies of assignments, you are required to submit all completed assignments electronically by uploading the files to your personal Blackboard folder.

BU History Department Writing Guide: For a detailed description of the proper format for historical essays, students should consult the BU History Department Writing Guide:

http://www.bu.edu/history/undergraduate-program/resources/writing-guide/

Plagiarism: Plagiarism is the passing off of another’s words or ideas as your own, and it is a serious academic offense. Cases of plagiarism will be handled in accordance with the disciplinary procedures described in the College of Arts and Science Academic Conduct Code. All students are subject to the CAS code, which can be read online at:

http://www.bu.edu/academics/resources/academic-conduct-code/

Penalties for plagiarism can range from failing an assignment or course to suspension or expulsion from the university. If you have any questions about plagiarism, please speak with me.

Class Schedule

Please note: Readings, songs, and television clips followed by an asterisk (*) are available on our course Blackboard website. All readings, song, films, and television clips should be completed or listened to in advance of the class for which they are assigned.

W 9/7 Course Introduction: What is Popular Culture?

F 9/9 Perspectives on Popular Culture: A Brief History

Readings:
1. George Lipsitz, “Popular Culture: This Ain’t No Sideshow”*


**American Popular Culture: Beginnings**

M 9/12  Popular Theater in Nineteenth-Century America

Readings:

W 9/14  Blackface Minstrelsy I

Readings:
1. Robert C. Toll, Excerpt from *Blacking Up* *

F 9/16  Blackface Minstrelsy II

Readings:

Songs:
1. Recent recordings of pre-1852 minstrel songs: “Zip Coon” and “Old Folks at Home”* *(http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/minstrel/misohp.html)*

M 9/19  Popularizing the American West

Readings:
1. Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, Introduction, Chapters 1 and 2

**Incorporating Popular Culture: The Emergence of a National Culture Industry**

W 9/21  Industry, Labor, and Leisure

Readings:
1. Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, Chapter 3

F 9/23  Entertaining Americans: Turn-of-the-Century Commercial Amusements

Readings:
1. Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, Chapter 4
M 9/26 Working Class Women and the Social Construction of Gender
   In-class discussion: Cheap Amusements

   Readings:
   1. Peiss, Cheap Amusements, Chapters 5 and 7

   **Deadline: Reading Response for Peiss**

W 9/28 Race and the Musical Culture Industry

   Readings:

F 9/30 Blues Music, Sexuality, and Domesticity

   Readings:
   1. Davis, Excerpt from Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*

   Songs:
   1. Bessie Smith, “Down Hearted Blues”*

M 10/3 Kinetoscopes and Nickelodeons: The Birth of American Motion Pictures

   Readings:
   1. Sklar, Movie-Made America, Chapters 1, 2, and 3

W 10/5 Silent Film

   Readings:
   1. Sklar, Movie-Made America, Chapters 4 and 6

F 10/7 Race and the Silver Screen
   In-class discussion: The Birth of a Nation

   Film:
   1. The Birth of a Nation

M 10/10 Columbus Day—No Class
T 10/11  Mass Production and Consumption

Readings:

W 10/12  Popular Culture in the Jazz Age

Readings:

F 10/14  FDR, the New Deal, and the Power of Radio

Readings:
1. Lawrence W. Levine and Cornelia R. Levine, Excerpt from *The People and the President*
2. Transcript of FDR’s Second Fireside Chat*

Radio:
1. FDR, Second Fireside Chat*

M 10/17  Modern Anxieties Over Radio

Readings:
1. Matthew Murray, “‘The Tendency to Deprave and Corrupt Morals’: Regulation and Irregular Sexuality in Golden Age Radio Comedy”*

Radio:
1. Mae West, Excerpts from *The Chase & Sanborn Hour*

W 10/19  Hollywood’s Golden Age

In-class discussion: *Movie-Made America*

Readings:

**Deadline: Reading Response for Sklar**

F 10/21  It Happened One Night

In-class discussion: *It Happened One Night*

Film:
1. *It Happened One Night*
M 10/24 Modern Anxieties Over Movies: Movie-Made Children
Take Home Midterm Exam distributed at end of class

Readings:
1. Henry James Forman, Excerpt from *Our Movie Made Children*

**Cold War Popular Culture**

W 10/26 The Cold War Era: Social, Cultural, and Political Contexts

Th 10/27 **Deadline: Take Home Midterm Exam due**

F 10/28 The Rise of Television
Distribute Analytic Paper Assignment

M 10/31 Domestic Containment: Family, Popular Culture, and the Cold War

Readings:
1. Metalious, *Peyton Place*, 1-100 (Note: Do not read the introductory essay—it will spoil the plot!)

W 11/2 Hollywood Fights the Cold War

Readings:
1. Metalious, *Peyton Place*, 100-150

F 11/4 Television Fights the Cold War

Readings:
1. Metalious, *Peyton Place*, 150-200

M 11/7 The Politics of Television: The Nixon-Kennedy Debates

Readings:
1. Metalious, *Peyton Place*, 200-300

W 11/9 *Peyton Place* and American Popular Culture
In-class discussion: *Peyton Place*

Readings:
1. Metalious, *Peyton Place*, 300-372

**Deadline: Reading Response for Metalious**
**Popular Culture and Modern Social Movements**

F 11/11  Popular Culture and Civil Rights I: Race, Rock n’ Roll, and Pop Music

M 11/14  Popular Culture and Civil Rights II: Televising the Civil Rights Movement

Readings:

W 11/16  Popular Culture and Civil Rights III: From Motown to Funk Music

Readings:

F 11/18  Feminism and Popular Culture I

In-class discussion: *Bewitched*

Readings:

Television:
1. *Bewitched*, Episode 1

M 11/21  Feminism and Popular Culture II

Readings:
1. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, Chapters 7 and 8

W 11/23-11/27  Thanksgiving Recess

M 11/28  Popular Culture & Race in the Post-Civil Rights Era

Readings:
1. Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, Introduction, Chapters 1, 4, 5, and 7

W 11/30  The Evolution of Television in the 1970s and 80s

**Deadline: Analytic Paper Due**

F 12/2  Hip-Hop I

Readings:
1. Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, Chapter 10

Songs:
1. The Sugar Hill Gang, “Rapper’s Delight”*
M 12/5  Hip-Hop II
In-class discussion: *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*

Readings:
1. Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, Chapters 12 and 14

Songs:
1. Public Enemy, “Fight the Power”*

**Deadline: Reading Response for Chang**

W 12/7  Twenty-First Century Television: Infotainment

Television:
1. *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* (Segment from Season 3, Episode 3)*

F 12/9  Modern Anxieties Over Television

Readings:
1. Todd Gitlin, “Flat and Happy”*
2. Neil Postman, Excerpt from *Amusing Ourselves to Death* *

M 12/12  Course Wrap-Up
Final Exam Study Guide distributed

**Final Exam Date TBD**